

AGRARIAN RELATION AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN KASHMIR (1885-1925 A.D.)

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It is needless to emphasise that until the fifties of the twentieth century the backbone of the economy of Kashmir was agriculture. Therefore, the stratification of the society was determined by the production relations in this sector. Those who controlled the land and appropriated the major share of it as superior right holders formed the richest class; those who managed it either on behalf of the state or any other superior right holder, formed the middle class and those who tilled the lands on behalf of the land lords, formed the lower class. Though stratification within these classes does not fail to meet the observant eye.

In order to have a clear view of the picture, it is necessary to discuss these elements separately.

Landlords

The agrarian structure of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, was feudal in character. It had been a common practice, during the reign of the great Mughals, to grant landed estates as Jagirs and *Muafis* to their loyal households, with proprietary rights. This traditional and customary practice continued even during the Sikh rule, for the Sikh rulers too conferred proprietor rights to the privilege holders. While some land was held in reserve for the royal households, some wastelands were given to certain trusted officers. And it was in consequence of this practice that an intermediary class emerged. This class operated between the cultivator and the government, who, in course of time, came to be known as the land lords. This practice was followed by the Dogra rulers also as a legacy of the Mughals and their successors.¹ It was under this system that the classes of Jagirdars, pattadars, and chakdars, different in the grades of social hierarchy, together constituted the upper stratum of the rural structure with all privileges discussed here under:

Jagirdars

At the head of this subdivision stood the jagirdars, who were acting as so many independent rulers in their respective jagirs.² During the period

under review there were as many as 3960/- jagirs in Kashmir.³ Every jagirdar had a certain number of villages assigned to him where from he was supposed to collect revenue,⁴ directly from all sources, viz, land revenue, grazing fee, forest revenue, income from water mills and other such means where from a villager earned his livelihood within the jagir of a particular jagirdar. Usually the jagirdar took away 75% and left only 25% of the total produce to the Zamindars.⁵ The jagirdar collected tax even from the lands which were leased out on rent.⁶ He was also authorised to appoint village headmen of his own choice and levied a number of cesses on the villagers. This class of landlord enjoyed a jagir of above Rs.3000/- per annum. At the apex of all these jagirdars, was the chief feudal lord, the maharaja himself, who enjoyed unquestionable authority to deprive any person of the estate granted to him.⁷

Pattadars

A new class of land lords came into existence during the reign of Maharaja Partap Singh when a committee was appointed to enquire into the Jagir and *muafi* lands. This committee instead of providing relief to the peasants from the burden, strengthened the basis of this exploitative structure by introducing a new class of landlords which came to be called as pattadars.⁸ A pattadar was a landlord enjoying a jagir of below Rs.3000/- though the came next to the jagirdar but was merely assignee of land revenue. He was not having proprietary rights and used to recover rent in kind from the cultivators of those lands which they held on rent.⁹ Among this class *Mukararee*¹⁰ holders and *Muafidars* were also counted. The former used to receive money from the government treasury after every six months and did a nominal service to the state,¹¹ but they did not pay any attention to the welfare of those who fed them.¹² Instead they caused more havoc and misery to the peasant. Similarly, the latter group possessed large tracts of land and derived all benefits from the land but they too did not pay even land revenue to the government. Thus they raised money by all means they could. These *muafidars* were of two types religious and non-religious.¹³ In religious *muafis* 1/3 of the amount of the land revenue assigned was received by muafidar in cash and 2/3 in kind,¹⁴ whereas in non-religious *muafis* it was received mostly in cash or kind or in certain cases in both cash and kind.¹⁵ Here it will not be out of place to mention that if a small stream passed through muafi land, the peasant cultivating their lands had to provide fish to the muafidar irrespective of whether the stream bred fish or not.¹⁶ Both these subclasses enjoyed same position and power as the *pattadars* did.

Chakdars

Last but not least among this landed aristocracy came the chakdars,¹⁷ who were just above the level of the common peasants. No doubt, they were privileged people, but were far lower than the jagirdars and pattadars. However, the chakdars enjoyed full ownership over the holdings, but were subjected to the payment of certain fee to their original owner i.e., the state.¹⁸ Therefore, they could get their lands cultivated by tenants.¹⁹ They were state employees and remained loyal to state.²⁰

Peasants Proprietor

Another important class of agrarian structure was the peasant proprietor. The term "peasant" has a variety of connotations. But it was most meaningfully used to describe a more or less homogeneous and un-differentiated community of families characterised by small holding operated mainly by family labour.²¹ Helpert has represented a good picture of such a community.²² And when we turn to village communities in India what strikes us is their highly differentiated nature, which has been largely viewed in terms of caste, but there were other ways of viewing it,²³ because there were other classes both above and below it, where a community included non-cultivating land owners at one end and share croppers and landless labourers at the other end.²⁴

Jammu and Kashmir was predominantly an agricultural state where about 85% of population lived in the villages forming the backbone of the entire economic structure of the state. The vast majority of the peasants suffered miserably under a system which owe historically, "its immediate origin to practices inherited from the most decadent and chaotic period of rule, and its form to changes made slowly and not without mistakes by men who were mostly aliens to the country and could hardly assimilate the requirements or enter into the feelings of the people."²⁵ The chronic deterioration in agriculture and its consequent impact on the life of the peasants was the result of the unsound revenue system accompanied with corrupt officialdom and the nature of relations among cultivators, the jagirdars, or landlords and the state. Under this system there was also a class of intermediaries who exploited the labour and the tiller of the land.²⁶

No doubt, the period under review saw tremendous changes in so far as the agricultural development and reforms were concerned. Not only the land settlements were brought into operation, but certain devices were adopted to improve the welfare of the State itself, which

hardly benefited the peasants.²⁷ This section of society constituted a sizable section of the rural population, who were dependent on land, which proved the determining factor,²⁸ and other allied pursuits like blanket weaving, basket weaving, Kangri making, bookkeeping and many other jobs. It was in this manner that they earned their livelihood and fed their family.²⁹ However, the earning from these activities was negligible and too meagre to substantially add to the low returns from their holdings. The migration of members of this class was not a taboo and a few of these, particularly those oppressed by money lender's exacting demands, left their homes during winter season to earn their livelihood.³⁰

Nature too played its role in the deterioration of the conditions of these peasants as observed by Lawrence, "In 1893 the Floods cost the state Rs.64,804/- in land revenue alone, 25,426 acres under crops were submerged, 2225 houses were wrecked and 329 cattle killed."³¹ Similarly, Pandit Anand Koul has observed a number of cases of fire, floods, earthquakes and other natural calamities to which these people were subjected.³² In the favourable seasons too, the peasant was hardly in a position to improve his lot, the state controlled the monopoly of trade and it was not possible for the peasants to obtain even reasonable prices³³ and was very difficult for them to compete with the state agencies as there were no developed markets. The peasants, except for those in the south of Kashmir, had very little surplus of grain, ghee, butter and walnuts, and as such, they had either to sell in Rawalpindi or owing to the inaccessibility of communication, to barter their surplus generally for salt.³⁴ The peasant was at the mercy of the money lender who fattened himself on the labour of the peasants.³⁵ Under these circumstances when peasant had to pay high rate of interest and to sell the crop before the harvest season, it was impossible for him to keep himself out of debt. The state also was not capable of preventing money lender from preying upon the peasant.

Not only this, but also the most hated³⁶ institution for Kashmiri peasant was the (*Kari-Begar*) forced labour which touched its height under the Dogra rulers. No doubt that Lawrence introduced reforms regarding this inhuman practice but he did not abolish it.³⁷ The peasants, were often pressed into *begar* at the time of sowing and reaping which naturally had an adverse effect on the economy of the country.³⁸ The prevailing system also encouraged a large scale corruption among the officials who exploited the people and obtained wood, grass, milk, cows and sheep free of any cost. Sometimes higher officials would even built houses in the city through the unpaid labour of peasants.³⁹ Most of the *begar* was carried on in summer when the

peasants were needed in their holdings. As a result the crops largely suffered in their absence. Hence it was the most pronounced feature of rural society in Kashmir. And in these circumstances when the peasant was left unprotected by every agency, his reduction to the lowest depth of poverty was but inevitable.⁴⁰ In such circumstances observes P.N. Bazaz rightly "that the peasant presented the appearance rather of a starving beggar than of one who filled the coffers of the State. They worked laboriously in the field during the six months of the summer to pay to the state its revenue and taxes, the officials their *rasum* and the money lender his interest".⁴¹ Hence they were left with nothing to feed themselves and their families and their condition was going from bad to worse,"⁴² which can be understood from the Kashmiri saying "*Batta, Batta, Ta Piyada Patta*"⁴³ meaning by "*we are asking for food and the tax collector is after us.*" While describing the conditions of peasantry Lawrence observes "the peasantry was over-worked, half-starved with hard words and hard blows subject to uneasing exactions and every specie of petty tyranny".⁴⁴

Artisans

The Kashmiris had won a great reputation as artisans and were celebrated in the olden days for their skill in art and manufacturers. The chief centre of Kashmiri industries was, no doubt, Srinagar, but other localities of the rural areas like, Anantnag, Kulgam, Bijbhihara, Zainagir, Shopian etc. were also famous for their special manufacturers.⁴⁵ Therefore, this class of workers were to be found in both rural and urban areas. They were mostly landless and therefore were counted among the *nongaras* or non-agriculturists.⁴⁶ However, the case of shawl weavers was different, their's was the most prized profession as they earned the highest wages as compared to other artisans and could also acquire and possess land, however, small in size. The rural artisans mainly consisted of weavers, carpenters, axe men and sawyers, basket makers, black smiths, oil-pressers, bee-keepers, watalis, potters and shikaries.⁴⁷

The profession of the rural artisans were distributed according to means and skill of the workers. The simpler and rough industries requiring less capital and skill were confined to the rural areas.⁴⁸ The most pitiable part of the artisan's life was that they could not change their profession for improving their economic conditions by finding out a more lucrative job than their adopted profession which was generally of hereditary character i.e. the son succeeded the father in his profession.⁴⁹ The artisans too suffered owing to the heavy taxation levied by the State government which becomes clear from the following

statement of W.R. Lawrence, "the surroundings of the artisans are miserable and squalid and it is said to contrast the beauty of the art work with the ugliness of the workman's lives."⁵⁰ This statement is confirmed by Sir Richard Temple, according to whom, "a massive class of artisans, were badly paid, badly nourished and badly housed, therefore, they were physically and morally wretched".⁵¹ Hence while observing the conditions of these people one can not conceal the truth that their condition was not satisfactory. They received low wages and worked for long hours in unhealthy surroundings. No class consciousness was there, as a consequence they could not protest nor could they form any organisation until 1937.⁵²

In addition to the above-mentioned categories who constituted the rural structure of Kashmir, reference may be made to village menials like butchers, washermen, tailors, bakers, smiths, carriers, dyers, milkmen, cotton cleaners and snuff makers.⁵³ They either received a fixed share of the harvest or were paid according to the nature of the work. In a large village at least one family of each trade was found. These people did not possess any land of hereditary nature except the vegetable plots attached to their houses. They were extremely independent as they sometimes refused to attend their master's house. Their position was not defined as was the case with the menials of the Indian villages, because the rate of remuneration was not always fixed.⁵⁴ Again owing to the miserable conditions of these menials some of them shifted from their profession to the land and worked as the farm labourers⁵⁵ and by the time it became impossible to distinguish between the agricultural labour proper and the menials of the village, there was nothing which could suggest that they had originally sprung from some inferior section. This shift was mainly as a result of the harsh taxation policy of the state which is evident from the fact that all sections of the artisans in spite of their low earnings were heavily taxed. Francis Young-husband observes "Butchers, Bakers, Carpenters, Boatmen and even prostitutes were still taxed, and coolies (labourers) who were engaged to carry loads for travellers had to give up half their earnings as tax."⁵⁶

Again within the rural structure we find some nonagricultural tribes consisting of superior and inferior elements. Among the former category, mention may be made Brahmans, Khattris, Sikh Brahmans, Rajputs among Hindus and Shaikhs, Saiyads, Mirs, Mughals, Pathans, Bombas among the Muslims, whereas in the later category, Faqirs, Dums, Gulwans, Chaupans, Bands, Hanjis and Gujras were included. All these tribes carried on their own profession within the village and contributed their share to the production on which the economy of the

village was based.⁵⁷ All these were dependent on those who worked on the land.

Landless Agricultural Labour

Majority of the rural population was counted under this class, which stood at the lowest rung of the society. They were generally dependant on others and were wage labourers as they were given one meal and six seers of un husked rice per working day. Their pitiable and deplorable condition can be observed from the fact that after working for a complete month they could save a little amount of money, which they received after disposing off their surplus grain.⁵⁸ According to the census Report of 1941, the average wage of agricultural labour varied from 5 to 6 annas a day.⁵⁹ After feeding his family members, he could spare an amount of one anna a day.⁶⁰ It is an unfortunate fact that in Kashmir there was no specific labouring class and at the same time the agricultural population was not sufficient for the full and the proper cultivation of the soil and staple food (rice) was a crop of so exacting a nature, that great damage was caused if cultivators were kept away from their land and villages which generally happened because of the presence of the institution of (Begar) forced labour.⁶¹

Again this section of rural society was engaged in agricultural operations only for a limited period not exceeding 6 months a year, for the rest of the calendar they remained unemployed, because the land remained under snow for more than 4 to 5 months.⁶² Therefore, some of these labourers sometimes migrated to the plains during the winter to earn a sustenance, whereas other supplemented their income by taking to weaving of woollen blankets, pattoo, cotton, willow baskets, colico printing, silkworm rearing cattle and sheep breeding and bee keeping while they stayed at home.⁶³ Mostly these poor labourers were forced during the chill and extreme cold season to perform the terrible job commonly known as *Kar-i-Begar* or forced labour, for which they were paid sometimes,⁶⁴ inadequately from 4 to 7 chilki rupees for the double (to and fro) Journey,⁶⁵ by their *kardar* (an important official in the pargana to collect revenue and assess standing crops). The condition of this class have been well picturised in the following words of P.N. Bazaz; "the poverty of the Muslim masses was appalling."⁶⁶ Dressed in rags which could hardly hide his body and barefooted, he worked laboriously in the fields during six months of summer. The lot of these people, as such was not good and many of them died every year, unknown, unwept and unsung outside their houses.⁶⁷ In short this landless agricultural wage labourer was at the lowest ladder of the society and his condition was pitiable,

deplorable as he was paid such a little amount with which he could hardly feed himself, not to talk of this family members.

In view of above, the agrarian relations and social stratification in Kashmir during 1885-1925 had inherent in it very conspicuous traits of exploitation by the landed aristocracy consisting of the agents of feudal lords like *jagirdars*, *pattadars* and *chakdars* who constituted the higher stratum of the agrarian social structure of the rural Kashmir, whereas in the same society the wage labourers or landless agriculture labourers, artisans and peasant proprietors were at the mercy of a section of population which had no interest in the land itself. As a result, their condition turned from bad to worse. This state of affairs continued throughout the Dogra rule despite the Land Settlement introduced by Sir Walter Lawrence in 1889 A.D.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *A Report of the land Commission, Jammu and Kashmir Government*, 1968, p.6.
2. M.A. Baigh, *Zarai-Islahat* Srinagar, 1950, p.25.
3. These jagirs also included 2347 *Mukarraree* and *Muafi* Jagirs. *Ibid.*, pp.31-33.
4. *File No.76 of 1896 Jammu and Kashmir Government (Chief Secretariat)*.
5. The term *Zamindars* in Kashmir has been invariably used to denote the tiller of the soil, whether he had his own land or was absolutely *Landless*. *Ibid.*
6. *File No.16 of 1896 Jammu and Kashmir Government Chief Secretariat*.
7. G.H. Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, p.11.
8. M.A. Beg, *Zara-i-Islahat*, pp.8-9.
9. *Karva-i-Jalsa, Council Aliya Riyasat-i-Jammu n-Kashmir*, January, 1898, Srinagar Archives, pp.62-65. In Punjab this class was known as "*Malik-i-Kabza*", which indicated that the holders ownership was limited to the jagir or estate, actually in his possession and was also responsible for the payment of its revenue, James, *Douie, Manual*, p.67.
10. M.A. Beg, *Zara-i-Islahat*, pp.30-34.
11. *Patta granted in favour of Thakur Kartar Singh 1988-89 B.E.* (J&K State Archives, Jammu).
12. M.A. Beg, *Zara-i-Islahat*; pp.31-33.
13. *Ibid.*
14. For each *Kharwar* Rs.2 and *anas* 4 were charged from religious *muafis* as share in kind. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Karava-i-Jalsa council Aliya, Riyasat-i-Jammun-n-Kashmir 1898*, pp.73-74.
17. In 1862 A.D. The State decided for the first time to allot the waste land called *Chaks* and the person who was allotted this land was designated as *Chakdar*. A. Wingate, *Preliminary Report of Settlement Operation in Kashmir And Jammu*, pp.61-62.

18. James Douie, *Manual*, pp.79-85.
19. Ibid., pp.67-68 and 80-82.
20. In 1879 the State introduced one more category of land holders known as *Mukararee Chakdars*, who too were allotted a portion of land under the head of *Mukararee chaks*, which were generally granted to revenue officials. They were also to follow the same terms and conditions as those of chakdars. Though this was a burden on the peasants, but at the same time, the greatest advantage of this system was that more and more waste land was brought under cultivation.
21. In fact such communities were quite common in many parts of Europe till the end of the 19th Century and probably may still be found in Southern and Eastern Europe. Andre Beteille, *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure*, p.24.
22. J.M. Halpern, *A Serbian Village*, 1958, pp.17-21.
23. Very often the Indian Village is clearly differentiated in terms of the ownership. Control and use of land so that in addition to present proprietors, subsisting mainly by family labour other sections are also indicated. Andre Beteille, op.cit., p.25.
24. Ibid.
25. Land reforms Officer *Jammu and Kashmir State Land Reforms*, Srinagar research Library.
26. G.H. Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, pp.12-13.
27. Special privileges were still allowed to all sections of society above the peasant and cultivators even after the introduction of the land settlement of Lawrence.
28. It was as a result of this that *nongars* (non-agriculturists) were assigned lower position than the petty peasant in the Society. There is also no definite evidence to show that caste in any case was the criterion for distribution of land. Lawrence Valley, p.302.
29. P.N. Bazaz, *Inside Kashmir*, p.252. *A Note on J & K State*, p.36 Lawrence, Valley, p.253.
30. *Census of India*, 1941, p.8.
31. Lawrence Valley, p.205.
32. Anand Koul Bamzai, *Geography of Jammu and Kashmir State*, pp.120-130.
33. The State procured Shali (unhusked rice) from peasants at the rate of Rs.1 and 14 anna per kharwar (72 kgs) and sold the same quantity for Rs.2 and 12 annas. Khalil Mirjanpuri, *Tarikh-i Kashmir*, MS p.306 also see M. Saif-ullah, *Tarikh-i Kashmir*, p.88.
34. Diwan Krishan Lal, *Account of Administration of Kashmir*, A Report, pp.20-22.
35. A Wingate *Preliminary Report of Settlement Operation In Kashmir And Jammu*, p.17.
36. *Census of India*, 1941, p.19.
37. It will not be out of context to mention here that the use of force in recruiting labour was not given up even in 1906. In fact the problem of forced labour continued to exist till the earlier part of Maharaja Hari Singh's reign (1925-1947). Despite Government order against the forcible requisition of the labourers. *Glancy Commission Report*, p.39. See also some *Aspects of Carvee in Kashmir*, M.I. Khan in research Bi-annual, ed. p.66.
38. P.N. Bazaz, *Inside Kashmir*, p.252. Lawrence, Valley pp.411-13.

39. Lawrence Valley, pp.414. Under the corrupt practices of *Begar* the proprietary rights of the peasants were destroyed and the peasants were reduced to the position of serfdom. As a consequence the peasants were compelled by the circumstances to flee to the Punjab.
40. *File No.151 of January 890 Foreign Department, NAI P. Nisbat Letter to Secretary to the Government of India*, p.10.
41. P.N. Bazaz, *The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir*, p.144.
42. Lala Ganeshi Lal, *Siyahat-i Kashmir*, p.34.
43. Lawrence Valley, p.4.
44. Ibid.
45. Lawrence Valley p.370 these towns and villages turned out excellent embroideries on shawls, gubbas, namdas, Lacquered wood work, wood carving, woollen cloths and blankets respectively.
46. W.R. Lawrence, *Assessment Report, Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture 1894, File No's 161-164*.
47. P.N. Bazaz, *Inside Kashmir*, p.252, Lawrence, Valley, pp.370-82. F. Young husband, *Kashmir*, pp.212-216. *Administrative Report of Jammu And Kashmir State for 1938-39 A.D.*, pp.27-28.
48. S.N. Koul, *Kashmir Economics*, pp.100-101.
49. M.I. Khan, *History of Srinagar*, p.80.
50. Lawrence Valley, p.374. For instance the shawl-bafs monthly income was rupees 7 to 8, out of which rupees five were charged as tax. So he was left with a petty sum of rupees three to live on. Ganeshi Lal, *Siyahat-i Kashmir*, p.33. P.N.K. Bamzai, *A History of Jammu and Kashmir*, p.668.
51. Sir Richard Temple, *Journals kept in Hyderabad, Kashmir, Sikkim and Nepal*, Vol II, p.276.
52. In 1937 it was for the first time when mazdoor sabha came into existence and the labourers were organised. G.H. Khan, *Freedom Movement In Kashmir*, p.335.
53. Lawrence Valley, p.315.
54. Ibid.
55. Francis Younghusband, *Kashmir*, p.179.
56. Ibid.
57. Lawrence Valley, pp.302-316.
58. G.T. Vigne, *Travels in Kashmir, Ladakh, Iskardu. countries adjoining the mountain courses of the India and Himalayas, North of Punjab*, Vol.III, p.120.
59. *Census of India*, 1941, pp.155-157.
60. G.T. Vigne, op.cit., p.120.
61. W.R. Lawrence, Valley, pp.411-13. It will not be out of context to mention here that the use of force in recruiting labour was not given up even in 1906. In fact the problem of forced labour continued to exist till the earlier part of Maharaja Hari Singh's reign (1925-1947). Despite Government order against the forcible requisition of the labourers, *Glancy Commission Report*, p.39.
62. P.N. Bazaz, *Inside Kashmir*, p.252.
63. *Administrative Report of Jammu and Kashmir State for 1938*, pp.27-28. Lawrence Valley, p.253.

64. Rober Thorp, *Kashmir Misgovernment*, p.73.
65. Even this paltry amount was rarely paid. P.N. Bazaz, *The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir*, p.144.
66. He has used the term Muslim Masses because this landless labour class was entirely constituted by Muslims, whereas the Pandits generally held the government jobs and exercised some influence,Ibid.
67. Ibid.